NEWAL
OPEN!!

Toaru Kagaku no Railgun SS: A Superfluous Story, or A Certain Incident's End

Note: This SS was written by Kamachi Kazuma, was published in PSP Toaru Kagaku no Railgun: The Complete Visual Guide, and acts as an epilogue for the Railgun PSP game.

Part 1

The term White Alligator could be dug up on the level of an absurd rumor, but the accuracy of information on that mysterious unit would decline rapidly once one attempted to find out what exactly it was.

The first thing to come to one's mind upon hearing the name would be the white alligators said to live in sewers.

One theory said it was an experiment forcibly training children based on the stories of those alligators having undergone a mutation in response to their harsh environment.

Another theory said it was a unit that mainly used the sewers for surreptitious movements.

A third theory said it was using the sewers as a metaphor for the "darkness" that would draw in and devour the unprepared.

Yet another theory said it had started as a powers development program created to destroy the restrictions set by a certain list whispered of in secret among researchers, but had developed into a business model that mass produced stable Level 4s to be used against Level 5s.

Each of those theories had a certain level of credibility and yet had enough conjectures added in to make absolute confidence impossible. The very existence of White Alligator seemed like nothing more than an unsure rumor spreading among the children.

Presently, only one thing was certain.

The identity of White Alligator was unclear, but those such as her definitely existed.

Part 2

Academy City was wrapped in the darkness of night. That description was only appropriate for that highly populated city filled with artificial light because it was referring to the industrial District 17. No unnecessary decorative lights were present and only the bare minimum of streetlights were present. The countless lights in the automated factories created the characteristic scene of an industrial area at night, but the darkness was still greater.

“This is the place,” said Misaka Mikoto. “According to the urban legend Saten-san picked up on, a refrigerated storage facility that already used massive amounts of electricity is being used to hide the power usage of the life support device that is controlled by a special amperage. And this is the only refrigerated facility that’s actual power consumption is *off some from its spec sheet but still has stable usage*.”

In the darkness of the night, a pale light lit up Mikoto’s face. It came from the screen of a PDA. Even as the display continued to scroll automatically, she put the device back in her skirt pocket.

“…‘The Whereabouts of Saitou Souta’, hm?,” said another girl standing next to Mikoto. The girl had brown hair and wore the summer uniform of Nagatenjouki Academy, one of the most prestigious schools in Academy City. She was a Level 4 with a power known as Military Oil. She was a former elite of the dark side whose history as a member of White Alligator had made sure she had dealt with plenty of dirty jobs.

She was Aizono Mio.

She had undergone first aid, but she still had fresh wounds. However, they both understood that they did not have time to carry out any more thorough treatments.

“What were you looking at that PDA for?”

“I was checking on something. I’m waiting for the results of some analysis.” It was then Mikoto’s turn to check with the other girl on something. “Listen up. Saitou-sensei is being held in here in a comatose state. Once we rescue him, you will turn yourself in to Anti-Skill as you promised. If you try to run away, I will not hesitate to fire this time.”

“I know, I know. More importantly, I have no time. Even now, Anti-Skill and Judgment are doing their best to track me down. Even a generous estimate gives me only this night. If you slow me down even slightly, I will leave you behind and finish this on my own.”

“Okay.” Mikoto punched her lightly clenched right fist into her left palm. “Then let’s get started. Let’s tie up all the loose ends.”

Part 3

Despite what Mikoto had said, they did not charge straight into the refrigerated storage facility. This was due to a comment made by Aizono Mio.

“This facility is likely a trap.”

“Whose trap?”

“Someone who doesn’t want anyone coming after Saitou-sensei. For one thing, I can’t believe that a rumor about his location would so conveniently pop up right when everything else was finished. I can only imagine that someone purposefully spread the rumor.”

“Do you think this someone knows who we are?”

“I doubt there are many other people that Saitou Souta would work as bait for.”

“Then what is our enemy planning to do? I doubt this person is going to think normal firepower is going to be much help against a Level 5 and a Level 4 working together.”

“True, true. If it was me, I know what I would do. I’d set nerve gas to be triggered the instant we stepped into the refrigerated storage facility. Once it was obvious our minds were too muddled to activate our powers, I would then immediately blow the building to smithereens with a bomb. Kaboom!!”

As usual, the change in her tone of voice sent a shiver down Mikoto’s spine.

“I’ve been wondering. Why does your tone of voice always change at times like this?”

Aizono Mio cleared her throat and said, “That’s just the way I am. I am automatically set to be interested in that type of thing.”

“And I don’t like how you talk down to me.”

“If you say a word more, I’ll turn you into a chunk of wax.” Aizono then changed the direction she was headed. “Anyway, entering the facility isn’t going to help, so let’s check the surroundings. If this was done according to the standard, we should find a vehicle.”

“Why?”

“Explosions are a bit noticeable. They’ll have had an escape vehicle prepared before setting up the explosives. They will! It’ll be at a point distant enough to not get wrapped up in any counterattacks from their target but close enough to immediately pick up their comrades and escape.”

“I told you not to talk down to me.”

“Shut up about that or I’ll dissolve your bra and panties and give you an oil massage.”

Feeling a strange chill, Mikoto fell silent. She only then realized that she was in danger of being left nude in the Floating Garden Observatory of the twin towers.

After circling around the refrigerated storage facility, they spotted a 4-door car oddly parked on the street. Aizono approached the driver’s side and…

With no forewarning, the 4-door family car was suddenly sliced in two.

The shape of Aizono’s hand had changed. More accurately, the black oil wrapped around her arm had formed the silhouette of a sword. Her clothes had also changed at some point. She now wore a special dress that was both a liquid and a solid.

“Yessss☆ Thanks for your hard work, you brave maid. Now, could you tell me where the hideout is? Where were you told to bring your companions in this piece of junk?”

“Wait…W-wh-what are you…!?”

The driver frantically pulled a handgun out of the dashboard.

However, he then noticed that something was wrong.

He felt a sticky feeling on his palm like he had picked up chocolate left in the car during the summer. Before he could even frown in confusion, the feeling slipped off of his hand. It took him a few more seconds to realize the handgun made of layered plastic that was harder than a hammer had melted.

“Hurry. Up. And. Tell. Me.”

“E-ee!? No. I’ll never talk!”

“Sigh. So you’re so far down on the chain of command that you don’t even understand how outmatched you are here.”

A sound like a rope being bent was heard. The next thing the driver knew, gasoline flowing from severed pipes surrounded his body, covering even his face.

“I suppose a nice oil massage would get the message across a little better. Have you ever wanted to be burned at the hands of a high school girl? Hmm. It’s a bit dark and hard to see. I think I’ll borrow that lighter of yours.”

“Burn!? A-are you an idiot!? I really will burn!”

“Now, it’s time for the bride and groom’s candle service!!”

Mikoto realized Aizono might actually do it, so she cut in.

“W-wait a second!! The wires were severed when you cut the car in two and this will be no joke if that’s ignited by the lighter!!”

“Ahh!! You idiot! Don’t come toward me while sending sparks everywhere like that!!”

“Eh?”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!!”

With a great explosive noise, the turkey that was the star of the party was served up.

Aizono immediately slid backwards along the ground as if pushed by the orange explosion while Mikoto used magnetism to jump back as far as she could.

The experienced former elite's face had gone slightly pale.

"I-I can't believe you. Roasting a completely defenseless underling for a gag is an off the charts level of cruelty. …Can I call you mistress?"

"No, please don't!! Also, this wasn't my fault! The explosion came from the trunk. A detonation signal was sent an instant ahead of time!!" Mikoto shouted back indignantly.

At Mikoto's feet, the relatively strong driver who normally would have declared his victory over the hardships of life was lying in a daze like a girl who had been knocked over and licked all over by her undisciplined pet dog.

Just before the explosion, Mikoto had used iron sand to absorb and isolate the gasoline surrounding the driver's body, and had then used magnetism to operate his seatbelt buckle and pull him toward her.

"Nnyah?" Aizono tilted her head to the side in confusion before the younger girl. "So that explosion was planned ahead of time?"

"Yes. If they finished us off in the facility, that would have been that. But they also put a bomb in the trunk if it wasn't enough. This double trap makes it seem more like they're only trying to buy time rather than seriously trying to defeat us."

"But what is the person behind this trying to do with the extra time?"

Mikoto and Aizono looked over toward the rescued driver. As the large man sat on the ground, he had tears in his eyes.

"N-noooooooooooo!! I'll talk. I'll tell you anything, just don't hurt meeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!! I don't wanna buuuuuuuuuuurrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrnnnnn!!"

"Mistress, it seems you've awakened the maiden within this tough guy."

"I told you it wasn't my fault! If you give even one more unnecessary comment, I'll surround your body in a low frequency hell!!"

Part 4

Apparently, those gathered to be members of White Alligator had all been girls in their early teens. Supposedly, this was based on a theory that things like high sensitivity, the durability girls had in order to withstand the pain of childbirth, and the unstable mentality of early puberty would be optimal for that special type of powers development. However, none of this is known for sure either.

The fact that this selection of members for White Alligator was made for purely logical reasons rather than for vulgar desires may have saved those girls from a worse fate.

However, these logical reasons led to their powers development being carried out such that their bodies were worn down and built back up, so their actual fate could hardly be said to be a good one.

The members making up White Alligator were all Level 4. This perfect equality was too much to be a mere coincidence, so it clearly must have been planned.

If White Alligator really was a project meant to mass produce Level 4s as a stable source of strength, then the cruelty of those in control of the project came into view.

The members making up White Alligator all had one thing in common.

And this thing in common could not merely be explained by the fact that they were developed in a special project.

Part 5

Mikoto and Aizono hid within a manhole.

“For a sewer, it doesn’t smell too bad in here. And the water looks nice and clear.”

“In the third generation sewer system, microbe purification plants are being tested out. They’re fairly large so the microbes have air to breathe. I’d say the water quality is better than the public pools full of chlorine.”

“With such a clean environment, this looks like it would be heaven for bugs.”

“It’s actually *too* clean for them. With no foundation for the food chain, bugs can get in but they can’t live here. The difference between the general idea of a sewer and what this actually is made it an excellent place for us to hide or move around in.”

“Us?”

“The gators of White Alligator. I doubt I have to tell you what story the name comes from.”

With the talk of microbes and purification, Mikoto was a bit worried their feet would be eaten into, but Aizono started walking through the water, so there must not have been any issues of that sort. In fact, the mere idea of some kind of killer amoeba was a bit farfetched.

“So does anyone else use White Alligator’s sewer routes?”

“Yes, according to the driver’s smartphone,” said Aizono as she waved around the small device that was doubling as an information source and a light source.

Mikoto frowned and said, “If that facility was a decoy, then the real thing must be elsewhere.”

“Assuming this smartphone isn’t a part of some further trap in case the driver was defeated, Saitou-sensei being transported is true. The refrigerated storage facility was just a diversion to buy them enough time to cut off any pursuit.”

“So they’re moving him at this very moment?”

“In this clean sewer, yes. But,” added Aizono cautiously, “I still can’t see what they’re after.”

“?”

“Saitou-sensei only has value as something to keep me in line. Saitou-sensei himself is a completely normal person with no connection to the dark side of the city. I don’t see why they would merely change his location rather than use him as a hostage or eliminate him now that he is no more use.”

“Come to think of it, when you were targeting Academy City with the Magnetic Debris Cannon, I didn’t see anyone come forward trying to use him as a shield.”

“I had complete control of the cannon, so they may have been unwilling to show themselves for fear that I would alter its aim and specifically target them. But now it seems we need to consider a different possibility.”

“You mean that there is some value in having Saitou-sensei apart from using him against you?”

“Yes, but I have no idea what that could be. As I said, he has nothing to do with the darkness. In fact, him being a completely normal person is what made him such an effective hostage.”

“It doesn’t really matter. Let’s just stop them and rescue him.”

“…It doesn’t matter?”

“I mean that it doesn’t matter what their reason is. We just have to save him, right? I wasn’t saying anything about Saitou-sensei himself.”

“I see. Yes, yes. You’re right. Ha ha. Sorry about that.”

Aizono quickly put on a forced smile, but something like a black blade was

wrapped around her right hand. She had tried to play it off as a pure maiden, but something more than that could be seen.

The blade wrapped around her right hand then returned to being a portion of her uniform.

“I suppose now we just need to provoke those behind this to get them worked up. We can send out an email to them all. Let’s see, something like ‘an informer told us where you are, so we’ll be right there’. What wording would be best to get the boss mad and suspecting his subordinates? This would be best if it spreads. What phrase would seem to fit anyone on a cold reading?”

“…You’re terrible,” muttered Mikoto.

Part 6

Academy City's infrastructure networks were designed on the theme of decentralization. The wind turbines throughout the city were a well-known example, and the third generation sewer system was another example. Instead of centralized treatment plants, microbe storage and cultivation facilities were scattered throughout the sewers. If the number of microbes increased too much like in a red tide, ultraviolet sterilization lights placed in important points of the sewers would activate to regulate their numbers.

Even if those decentralized infrastructure networks were targeted in a terrorist attack or the like, Academy City could continue functioning. The system had enough redundancy built in that the rest of the system could easily deal with the excess burden left if a single location was destroyed. That allowed them to avoid the worst possible situation.

This was within one of those microbe storage and cultivation facilities.

The area was about as large as a school gym and it had multiple metal pipes lined up within it. Each pipe was as wide as a school classroom and about three stories high. With stairways built next to the pipes and midair passageways crisscrossing above, the area seemed cramped despite how large it was. The area was said to have once been used by White Alligator as an indoor shooting practice range. However the "practice" in question involved espers firing at each other with real bullets.

On one of those strangely clean midair passageways that had absorbed plenty of blood which had subsequently been broken down by the microbes, a girl wearing pants under a short dress leaned her back against the metal railing.

The cell phone in her hand had no static over the connection even in that underground space.

"…Yes. A job's a job, so we'll finish this. There is no need to worry about Saitou

Souta, but is he really that valuable?” she said into the phone.

“It is not your job to determine anything’s value, Hyoudou-kun.”

“True. Well, I’ll play my part as the soldier and do the physical work. I wasn’t given a life with anything to live for besides the reward for a completed job.”

With that simple reply, the girl called Hyoudou ended the connection and called out to a colleague down below. The colleague was a girl wearing a brightly colored sports brand track suit.

“Kohina, how are things with the ‘cargo’?”

“A real pain in the ass! In fact, you help too, Maki!! Just the person would be fine because I could stuff him in a body bag and carry him like that. But he needs this life support device with him, so we need this inflatable boat. I have to crouch down, grab it with both hands, and push. As I said, it’s a real pain in the ass! I’m going to have back pain at my age!!”

“Sorry, my job is to go ahead and make sure everything is all clear. What about Sayori and Yuri? Are they complaining again?”

“You’re the same as them, you wage thief! I’m the only one doing any work around here! Sayori said she was the rear guard and has just been lazing around behind and Yuri keeps saying it’s too dark or too scary or that there aren’t any guys around here and walks off!! I can tell she’s lying! That’s not how you’re supposed to use fake tears!!”

“The mission will be over soon enough, so stick with it until then. I’ll give you these potato sticks. They’re cheese flavored.”

“You’re not going to win me over with potato sticks!! And don’t bring out strong smelling things like that in the middle of a mission!!”

“Then I’ll just have to throw them away. And there are so many left.”

Kohina fell silent for a bit before saying, “Th-the potato sticks did nothing wrong.”

“Negotiation complete.”

Hyoudou threw the box of snacks over the railing where Kohina caught it with a sulky expression and started munching on the contents.

“Really, our job is already done. Just wrap up Saitou Souta, boat and all, and stuff him in the storage and cultivation tank. Then we just have to leave some obvious signs for our pursuers and leave with the dummy boat. Once no one is after Saitou Souta, a different unit disguised as cleaners will come recover him.”

“Heh.” A twisted smile appeared on Kohina’s face. “I’m not really one to talk, but you’re pretty twisted. That produces nothing. Do you like the taste of other people’s misfortune that much?”

“I don’t want to hear that from someone rampaging right along with me.”

“What did you think I meant by ‘I’m not really one to talk’? Anyway, if you want revenge, why don’t you carry it out with your own hands? That’s much more healthy. And then it might actually be worth helping you.”

“That would be too boring.”

“You really are twisted. You’re on the same level as someone who can only get turned on by seeing their lover assaulted by some stranger.”

Silence fell.

Silence only interrupted by the crunching of snacks being consumed.

And then the two sensed it at the same instant.

Most likely, Sayori and Yuri had sensed it too, wherever they were.

“…This smell.”

“Napalm!?”

Just as she cried out, Aizono Mio’s Military Oil exploded without restraint.

Part 7

And Misaka Mikoto cried out.

“Have you never heard of the concept of restraint!? This time, every person there must have been roasted black. And even if they escaped the explosion itself, the leftover toxic gases like carbon monoxide filling the area will take them out!! And what about Saitou-sensei!?”

They were at the entrance of the facility, but they could not peer inside. A roasting wind and gases were bursting out through the entrance. Oddly enough, the flames themselves could not be seen, but that may have been because all the oxygen in the area had been consumed.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. I gathered all the information I needed. I can hear voices from quite a distance by spreading out a thin rubber membrane. Saitou-sensei is inside a metal tank.”

“…You can do that?”

“It also works well for contraception☆ But maybe you’re a bit young for that.”

“From some of the things you’ve said, I’d say you’re a virgin, too”

“Oh, are you hoping for a catfight? I’ll have you know I’m undefeated when it comes to oil wrestling!!”

“Things like that are exactly what I was-…”

Mikoto trailed off and took a step back.

At the same moment, countless beams of light ran through concrete wall separating the facility from the sewer. With the wall sliced to pieces, a great amount of oxygen was sucked into the facility.

The flames that had been forced out flared back to life, but the flow of fresh oxygen also diluted the toxic gases such as carbon monoxide.

Of course, Mikoto and Aizono had not done it.

It was those inside the facility who had wanted the fresh oxygen.

“What?” said Mikoto with a displeased frown.

She was not surprised at the mere fact that someone inside was still moving around after that explosion. After all, she could name a person or two who could withstand a direct hit from a napalm attack.

Aizono Mio could do the same.

In fact, with her Military Oil power, she likely knew even better how many people could survive it.

“…Seriously? Ahh, I should have realized this. It makes sense. I may know how the dark side works as a former member of White Alligator, but I should have been more cautious given how perfectly I was able to predict the enemy’s actions.”

Black figures appeared amid the orange flames on one of the midair passageways.

A total of four enemies appeared.

It was not just the flames lighting them from behind that made their coloration seem black.

They wore the same composite armor dress made of oil that Aizono Mio wore.

“We’re up against other former White Alligator members. That is why I was able to so accurately predict their actions.”

Part 8

All of the currently confirmed members of White Alligator have the power to directly control oil and other petroleum products as well as freely change their properties. Technically speaking, it is possible they should all be given different esper names, but those controlling them simply refer to them all as Military Oil.

However, this is odd when you think about it rationally.

Even if you ignore the fact that their ultimate strength and utility only reaches Level 4, if White Alligator is a project meant to mass produce Level 4s as a stable source of strength, then the individual types of powers should vary from person to person. For example, there could easily be a Level 4 that controls fire or a Level 4 that controls wind in the unit.

However, the reality of the situation is that every member of White Alligator has the Military Oil power.

Why?

In the beginning, there must have been Level 4s with powers other than Military Oil. But those in control put them through anti-Level 5 training that went beyond harsh. Not all of the children had powers that could break through those tests. Almost as if those in control had put them through a sieve aligned to their own tastes, only the Military Oil espers survived.

That alone is astounding enough.

It does not sound like something that could occur in the country of Japan.

The Military Oil girls felt nothing but pure fear for those in control who had thrown them into that hell, but they also managed to retain a stable mentality by realizing they had special value for surviving. They had special powers. That had been why they had survived no matter what circumstances they had been put in. In Academy City, the strength of one’s powers determines everything, so they

did not feel they had been wrong to abandon their other comrades. Those in control felt no need to correct this thought process because it was actually quite convenient for them.

At that stage, those in control began calling the Military Oil espers “beasts”.

This term was a simple way of expressing what their characteristics had become. A ferocious power had awoken inside them, yet they never thought of turning that power on those in control who were “raising” them. Their powers only had value in being beneficial for those in control and attacking those in control for the sake of freedom was taboo. In that way, the girls drove themselves into a corner without even having to be taught these things.

If they had rebelled, it is unlikely those in control would have fared well, but for the above reasons those likely powerless people in control never underwent any damage from that group of espers.

Apparently, a few of the discovered Military Oil espers had lost all ability to speak human language. However, in that twisted community, those were the best students who were held up as role models for the rest of the group.

Part 9

They stepped forward into the orange light. Into the facility colored by flames. The four figures showed no surprise at Mikoto and Aizono's entry. They may not have known the exact method, but they seemed to have been expecting some kind of attack.

"There are other survivors of White Alligator besides you?"

"Originally it was a platoon of 40 or 50. The ideal situation was to wear down a single Level 5 as a group. We really might have been piranhas more than gators. By the time those in control collapsed, about half of that number was left, but I have no idea what the others have been doing since. …And it looks like I'm being reunited with a few of them in the worst possible way."

Mikoto felt a chill run down her back at those smoothly spoken words.

Aizono Mio had done so much on her own.

Mikoto could imagine how bad the situation would be if she was undergoing a coordinated attack from 40 or 50 of them.

In response, Aizono Mio's "brethren" smiled thinly.

They had the same power and wore the same dress.

And yet they had the smile of those who stood in a decidedly different place.

"Since you so readily tried to roast this entire area, I take it you already know about our diversionary tactic."

"Maki, from how loudly you were talking about it, I thought you wanted me to hear. If you flee now while leaving obvious hints, I'm not going to follow you."

"This plan to hide Saitou Souta in an immovable tank inside an old White

Alligator shooting practice range was actually given to us. It's almost like we were given a reason to have to fight to the death like this."

"…Well, as long as I can bring an end to this, I don't care. Destroying everything with the Magnetic Debris Cannon would have been fun, but having everything finished in one big happy ending would make me want to redo things."

The way they spoke, no dissatisfaction or discontent with the current situation could be seen.

Was that the true face of White Alligator?

No.

Most likely, it was just the tip of the iceberg of a darkness that went much deeper.

"Why?" muttered Mikoto. "If it hadn't been for the incident with Saitou-sensei, Aizono Mio would have continued her normal high school life. She had cut herself off from this dark past. You all aren't like Aizono. I don't understand why she had to go back to the darkness. Why?"

Despite being the one with a connection to them, Aizono herself showed no sympathy for her "brethren".

In fact, only scorn could be seen on her face.

"Perhaps I just couldn't forget the taste of blood. Up until I changed 'masters', my environment *only gave me any value when I was on the side doing the killing*. I may have given that environment priority. There were no principles or ideologies behind it. I just rampaged as much as I wanted and let others justify it for me. …Honestly, it's like I was trying to be the best gator student."

"Do you feel more sophisticated now that you've woken from that dream?"

"More than you idiots who are still tripping out in a nightmare."

The girl called Maki shrugged.

Mikoto frowned and said, "So Saitou-sensei himself isn't your objective?"

“That’s a tricky question to answer. The one thing I can say is that our objective is clearly different from that of the higher ups. The higher ups seem to want Saitou Souta in order to obtain a control manual.”

“A control manual?”

“For you, Aizono Mio.” Maki placed a hand on the midair passageway’s railing and grinned. “The goal of White Alligator was to gain stable control of great power by lowering a human mind down to the level of a beast. It had a certain level of success, but it wore down the people’s mentalities too quickly. In other words, after all the cost spent on their soldiers, those soldiers were short lived and control could not be regained after a certain point.”

Despite having been one of those soldiers, Maki showed no sign of hesitation while speaking of them in that way. Mikoto sensed a hint of bitterness in her tone. She was reminded of the military clones she had seen somewhere.

“And then came Saitou Souta. He brought humanity back to Aizono Mio and succeeded in accurately controlling her. He both lowered the rate her mentality was worn down and also prevented any betrayal or rebellion. …This goes beyond White Alligator. All of those who want to control high level espers as soldiers would see this as a dream come true. That is why there is nothing unnatural about them wanting this control manual he built up as a school counselor.”

That was why any trace of Saitou Souta had disappeared so thoroughly. Nagatenjouki Academy had been desperate to cover up the accident, so they must have asked someone else for help. Maki and the others’ higher ups had not wanted to make Saitou Souta disappear. In the process, they had naturally taken his personal possessions and searched for any data that could lead them to this “control manual”.

It was only because they had not found anything that they wanted the man himself.

They might wake him up and question him. They might be developing some kind of technology to suck the information out of his brain while still comatose. Or they might have even been getting the help of a Psychometer.

“…Those idiots,” muttered Aizono Mio without thinking.

They had pressed a dangerous button by bringing those old memories back to her.

“They never learn. There’s no conspiracy behind what happened to me. What saved my human side was something much simpler yet much more difficult to pull off.”

“We know that. But the higher ups who want to bring back White Alligator and restart the development of the unit do not have the humanity needed to properly analyze the miracle that Saitou Souta caused. The way they see it, if he was able to change you in the way he wanted, there must be some kind of manual or flowchart with which it can be reproduced.”

“So you all are risking your lives on a project you know has no hope of succeeding because you know the higher ups’ thinking is skewed? That’s wrong in and of itself. It isn’t normal.”

“Whether the higher ups are right or wrong, we just need something that allows us to accomplish our own objective. In fact, an organization like that isn’t going to last long. I’d say they will be devoured by another portion of the darkness before long. We’re just using them while they are still there.”

“…Your own objective?”

“Yes. Those idiots’ methods are quite convenient for us.”

Maki smiled.

Her smile was evil and yet somehow childish. The smile had an obvious sense of intimidation on the surface, but a lust for battle could be sensed hidden below. Mikoto felt a great difference between it and the smile she had seen on Aizono Mio’s face when she had chosen to abandon all and fight for Saitou Souta, even if her methods had been wrong.

“Really, we just didn’t like it. We didn’t like how you and Saitou Souta ended everything without getting anyone’s permission.”

“What…?”

That was the first time Aizono had shown any kind of confusion during that

conversation.

Suddenly, the ceiling collapsed and dissolved directly above Mikoto's head. She frantically tried to jump back, but the floor beneath her feet had become soft as mud. She sank knee deep into the floor and the liquefied ceiling covered her like an avalanche.

"This is what happens when you gather so many espers that can freely alter petroleum products. Did you not think we might have altered the terrain itself? …Well, we did put metal and concrete around it to make it harder to notice, but that issue was pointed out back when we were in White Alligator."

With the noise of a viscous liquid being sucked down a drain, the thick black liquid sank down while covering a number of the midair passageways and tanks. Still enveloped in the stuff, Mikoto was quickly sucked down. Most likely, a pitfall a few dozen meters deep had been created. It was too deep for Aizono to see the bottom.

Maki glanced down into the darkness from the edge of the hole.

"Down below is a multipurpose drain meant to help prevent floods. Yuri, head down to make sure the bonds don't break."

"Roger that."

One of the girls unhesitatingly jumped down into the giant hole. She was likely planning to use some kind of rubber power. Maki did not even send a glance her way.

"How long do you think she can hold her breath? 5 minutes? 7 minutes? Lasting 10 minutes would be close to a miracle. But what do you think the odds are of you getting away from us and rescuing Misaka Mikoto in that time?"

"Would 100% be too high?"

"A bit." Maki's expression did not change at Aizono's cheap provocation. "After all, White Alligator was meant to mass produce stable Level 4s to use against the irregular Level 5s."

"…"

“From that look on your face, I guess you aren’t an idiot. Yes. Our strengths as individuals are kept equal. *Doesn’t that mean the victor will be decided simply by who has the greater numbers*?”

Eliminating Misaka Mikoto from the battlefield had been the turning point for them.

Now that it was done, the rest was easy.

One against three.

Their strength was simple and therefore lacking in openings, and they now mercilessly wielded it against Aizono Mio.

Part 10

Espers who reached the higher levels could mostly be divided into two types.

The one-point types that used one exceedingly powerful attack.

And the all-purpose types that put together many different varied forms of attack.

Military Oil espers like Aizono Mio and Hyoudou Maki fell into the latter category. Their single power gave them strength by having many different ways it could be used offensively.

And of course the number of different means of attack increased overwhelmingly when more than one such esper worked together.

Starting with Maki, the three girls jumped over the railings of the midair walkways without hesitation. Wing-like parts grew from their backs and thighs, slowing their speed and angle of descent. When their feet came in contact with the sides of the tanks or stairways, a highly-elastic rubber-like power repelled them along through the air. Together, they formed a ring surrounding Aizono, and they tried to disturb her with the changes in speed and angle.

As the Military Oil girls approached accompanied by rapid explosive sounds that were similar to a machine gun firing, Aizono clicked her tongue.

Aizono Mio had been trained to fight the #7 who could move faster than the speed of sound, the #4 who could freely use extremely high-speed projectiles, the #3, and others, so she did not feel threatened by pure speed.

The problem was…

(Shit. Their feints are clearly coordinated to work against me specifically! They’re throwing off their timing and going with the hardest speed and angles for me to deal with!!)

They may have resented her as a fellow White Alligator member. Trying to follow each one individually by eye while within that spiral of movement would be playing right into their hands. Aizono chose to get some distance and then attack them one by one, so she used oil at her feet to move at high speed as if sliding along the ground.

Or that was what she had meant to do.

Instead, her body came to a stop like she was bolted to the ground.

“We control the same oil,” said Maki with a smile and a giant blade on her arm. “So the precedence of control will be decided by numbers. I don’t think you can win in a game of tug of war.”

“!!”

Before Aizono could take her next action, the other three girls counteracted her attempt.

With an unpleasant noise, Aizono Mio’s silhouette split into multiple pieces.

Lightly swinging the blade on her right arm, Kohina spoke to Maki.

“Did we do it?”

“I definitely felt the resistance of slicing through her backbone,” added Sayori.

“We didn’t.”

Maki pointed toward the remains of what had been sliced to pieces by giant blades. The surface seemed like that of a human, but the inside visible where it was sliced was black.

“It’s a silicone doll made to look like her. To make it feel real, she even divided up the parts to make fat and muscle.”

Maki swung her huge blade and the instrumentation for a large refrigeration unit was sliced diagonally. The blade itself had not cut it; something like a guillotine had flown out.

This was followed by a hard thunk.

The instrumentation had been sliced through, but Aizono Mio had stopped the guillotine-like object with an attack of her own from within the instrumentation.

While shutting one eye, she said, “They may be life-sized, but they’re quite cheap. You’ll never have to worry about lonely nights again.”

“Since you’re purposefully keeping your chatter light to keep your mind stable, you must be more worried than you let on,” said Maki in a blunt analysis.

Kohina added, “It looks like we can’t completely take away her control of the oil even with three of us. But the data from this battle will tell us how much it weakened her.”

“Yes. And since she did not use that substitution technique (tentative name) from the beginning, it must have been something like a last resort. In other words, she can’t use it freely.”

With the sound of the air being sliced, the three Military Oil girls held their blades up once more.

“We’ll start with that composite armor. We’ll strip you bare in front of your precious teacher.”

Aizono tilted her head a bit and said, “Hmm. Maybe I should have tried something more heavy-handed like that to get through that good, thickheaded smile barrier of his.”

An explosive noise roared up.

As the three figures approached at close range, Aizono transformed the oil at her feet into something like highly elastic rubber and she jumped straight up. She jumped higher and higher landing on the tanks and the hanging remnants of walkways destroyed by the napalm before jumping again. Of course, the other Military Oil users interfered with her control of the oil, but it was not enough to rob her of all control. If she added the interference into her calculations, she could control the oil just fine even if she was weakened somewhat.

With their prey escaped, the other three immediately changed their direction by

90 degrees to pursue her.

Aizono had expected that.

“Ah?” said Sayori in confusion.

Aizono Mio had affixed a thick rubber panel near the ceiling and headed forcefully toward it. The rubber shot her like a bullet in the opposite direction. With the sound of wind roaring in her ears, she flew toward Sayori at a speed much greater than Sayori had expected. She was unable to evade. Aizono’s feet were pressed together side to side, and the soles of her shoes slammed mercilessly into Sayori’s face.

A great roar exploded out that did not sound like something that could come from two people colliding.

Still in midair, Aizono Mio gave a slight smile at the dull feeling she felt through her shoes.

“Rope techniques are the best of pro wrestling, baby!”

“…But if you fail, you open yourself up to a lariat.”

“!?”

An unpleasant noise vibrated through the soles of her shoes. Aizono saw two eyes glare out at her through the gaps in the black coloration covering the pale skin. The black oil armor had accurately distributed the force of that blunt impact.

Sayori’s lips writhed.

“One can counterbalance you.”

Aizono heard the sound of something slicing through the air on her left and right. Maki and Kohina were approaching fast.

“Three can overwhelm you.”

“Tch!!”

Aizono sent another kick toward Sayori who was beneath her feet and used the repelling force of rubber to jump up high. By ascending, she avoided the blades approaching from left and right and the spear thrust up by Sayori. She landed on top of one of the three-story tall tanks.

Meanwhile, the other three once more smoothly planted their feet on the facility floor.

Maki opened her mouth to speak.

“If you’re hoping to retrieve Saitou Souta and flee, give up now. Your prize does not lie in that tank and you could never lose us while carrying such a heavy burden.”

“I suppose I should praise you for not using him as a shield.”

“That would be too boring.” Maki turned the giant blade made of processed petroleum products back into its original dripping oil. “If we wanted to, we could finish Saitou Souta off on our own, but we would do it in a rather predictable way. There is a limit to how cruel we can be. However, the higher ups who seriously wanted to create and control something like White Alligator and then actually did it are a different matter. They would surely put an end to Saitou Souta in some twisted way we could never even imagine.”

“…”

Aizono remained silent and Kohina continued for Maki.

“It would be something like having your lover assaulted by a stranger. And while it may be horrible, it would still be effective. After all, those adults are the ones who messed us up so badly. Whatever it is you’re waiting for, there is no help there. If you were honest with yourself, you would know that.”

Then Sayori spoke. “Even if we sliced you to pieces, we’d keep it at the level where you could still be hooked up to some horrible life support machine. After all, just finishing off Saitou Souta would be too boring. It’s only any fun if it comes with someone to scream as they watch.”

Their chatting was silenced by the sound of something slicing through the air.

Aizono Mio strongly swung the blade in her hand.

“…I’ll turn you into gator food.”

“You idiot. You really are stupid. What did you learn in that hell? I thought we learned more than we wanted back in White Alligator that this is not a world where being more determined or having more guts is going to get you anywhere.”

In response to the three girls’ wills, the oil in the area all started writhing at once. A number of black bands were being created. The ends of the bands connected to the metal tanks or the midair walkways. The center portion of the bands bent in U-shape and gathered in Maki’s hand.

It looked something like a huge strange flower or a giant slingshot, but it was something else.

“The Multiphase Straight Hammer. Well, you were in White Alligator, so I don’t really need to explain it to you, but it combines the elasticity of rubber, the explosive power of burnable oil, and super high speed propellers to fire a projectile at high speed.”

“…”

“Originally, five of them would be prepared by a group of 8 of us each. The remaining ten people would hold down the target while the massive high speed projectiles would fire from multiple directions and reliably kill the target. That was a strategy to be used against the #4 or the #3. I have no idea how much the power will be reduced with only three of us, but the technical numbers don’t really matter. As long as it’s powerful enough to break through the metal tanks that are the greatest cover around here, we can shoot you down wherever you try to run.”

The sound of straining thick rubber could be heard.

With a thin smile, Maki said, “Your composite armor isn’t working as well as it should be, so you’re going to have to pull this off with determination and guts. How about you give this a nice, moving ending that will bring a tear to people’s eyes?”

“So you’re just a carbon copy of how things were back then. I hadn’t expected you to change much, but I never thought it would be this-…”

“Achoo!”

A tremendous vibration that seemed to penetrate the entire facility exploded out.

Part 11

The Multiphase Straight Hammer was one of the methods developed to attack a single Level 5 with a group of Level 4s. It was unknown how effective it would be in an actual battle, but the researchers had predicted that it would be more effective if the projectile had intentionally increased air resistance.

In other words, they purposefully made sure the projectile would break apart partway through.

The shockwave would assault the target as a surface a few dozen meters across rather than in a single point, preventing the target from evading. It also functioned to hold them in place. As long as a portion of the initial attack struck the target, the target's physical strength would be worn down enough to prevent any quick movements. Then the same shockwave would strike again and again while the target could only stand in place and have his or her life slowly but surely worn down.

The attack was straightforward, but it was repeated again and again and again.

Despite how it looked, it had no flashy effects.

It was a plain, stable, and – most importantly – surefire attack.

But that was when it was being used against the monsters that were known as Level 5s. If it was used against a mass produced soldier that had her defenses interfered with and could not function at full power, a single shot would be enough to blow her away along with the area of the facility behind her.

"Gh…bh…"

A crash. She may have used her little remaining power to create a low-elasticity substance to absorb the shock, but that was still the best word to describe how Aizono Mio looked. However, it could be said she was lucky to still be in one piece after an attack like that.

“See? Determination and guts aren’t going to get you anywhere,” said Maki as she continued to keep her distance from Aizono who looked like she had fallen some great distance.

At that point, approaching her enemy could only work to her disadvantage. While repeating one straightforward attack, keeping your distance was a good idea.

“I do have to commend you for giving up on evading or defending and simply taking it head on. Even if the shockwave creates a large surface, the fragmentation of the shell is effectively random, so the thickness of the wall can be inconsistent. Intentionally putting yourself into one of the thinnest portions may be effective, but it isn’t an idea any ordinary person would ever think of.”

“…”

A hard sound could be heard as Aizono created a blade from oil and tried to stand up using it in place of a cane. However, her puny weapon soon turned back into dripping oil. Her control had been taken.

“Well, this is the best arrangement direction-wise, so we can just continue this like normal. It looks like we might finish this without having to crush Saitou Souta.”

“…He…has nothing to do with this,” said Aizono, sounding like she had something caught in the back of her throat. “If this has to do with White Alligator…I can do it instead. Why are you…going this far…to involve him…”

“Don’t be silly. Our anger is primarily targeted toward Saitou Souta,” said Maki.

While breathing heavily, Aizono Mio frowned and muttered, “Why? He…has no connection…to the darkness. So he has no connection…to White Alligator…”

“Yes, he has no connection. *That is exactly why we are angry*.”

A dark tone could be seen in her smile.

Just like with Aizono Mio, something hidden below could be seen in her smile.

“ ‘I want to save everyone. I want to hear the shouts of people’s hearts that have

been overlooked. I want to heal the wounds of those who have become truly cornered. I want to hold out my hand even when I have so little strength. I want to save even those of White Alligator.' …Saitou Souta's words do sound wonderful and they bring light with their grounding in a proper worldview from a proper world."

"What, are you saying he was a lying hypocrite? He showed he meant what he said with me. As a member of White Alligator, you should understand just how difficult returning one of us to being a normal person is."

"*But Saitou Souta did not save us.*"

Aizono Mio froze in place.

Meanwhile, Maki's words continued as if they were slipping into her ears.

"He was satisfied with saving you. He did not go any further. He proved he had the power to save those of White Alligator with you, but he abandoned us for his own personal reasons."

"Did he just grow sick of it all? He may have been satisfied after having some fun, but surely his collector's spirit would have been telling him to continue on. If you're going to do something, lick the bones clean. Just picking at it a bit and calling it quits is rude to the cook and to the people who don't have enough to eat," added Kohina.

"It all started for us when our hopes were cut off in front of us. Surely you can imagine how you would react if he had told you one day that he had had enough and was calling it quits with you. We all experienced that same hell," said Sayori.

A single girl had been saved from an inescapable hell. That alone would make for a lovely story, but how much pain would that cause for the others who had watched the hero leave without them.

Even after those in control of White Alligator had fallen to ruin, some had been unable to escape the darkness. Others had managed to escape, but had been unable to fit into normal society, so they were shown a different hell. And eventually, a portion of them had gathered in one place once more.

“We wanted to be saved too,” said Maki as if she was squeezing out the words. The ability to shed common tears had left her long ago. “We wanted to become a heroine like you. There were no clear conditions that decided it. Just because he was satisfied with only you, the gates of hell were slammed shut in our faces. How is that not reason to be angry?”

“You…idiots…” muttered Aizono. “In that case, baring your fangs toward him is the same as throwing away your last chance.”

“Weren’t you listening? We ‘wanted’ to be saved. In the past tense. We no longer have the ability to have such silly dreams.”

From the beginning, there had been no help for those in White Alligator.

It may have even been wrong for Aizono Mio to be pulled out of that situation. Even if that was such a warm and lovely mistake, it may have been wrong for Saitou Souta to have had anything to do with that world.

However…

When Saitou Souta saw what he saw in the depths of that hell, he was not the type of person to be afraid or disgusted; he was saddened. Aizono Mio was not about to let that miraculous movement of his heart lead to his death.

“…He did nothing wrong,” spat out Aizono as she stared sharply at the other three girls. “If anyone was in the wrong, it was me. If I had not been saved, this anger would never have come to be. So it is I that should receive your anger, not him.”

“Your ability to think like that shows that you really have regained your humanity. That will do nothing but make us jealous and regretful.”

The sound of straining rubber could be heard. The countless rubber bands that made up the Multiphase Straight Hammer gathered in once place.

“We will continue with the standard method that leaves you with no hope. We will not try to be the heroine and say we will beautifully finish this in one blow. We are the gators that crawl through the sewers, so we will tear at your flesh slowly but surely with the shockwaves. We will keep you from moving and rip you to pieces without giving you an opening.”

As she spoke, Maki used her power to create the special projectile.

And she gave signal of destruction.

“Fire. And continue firing.”

Part 12

Meanwhile, Misaka Mikoto was wrapped in oil composite armor down in the multipurpose drain that looked like a giant tunnel. Also down there, Yuri was attacked by an unknown chill down her back. It had been longer than 10 minutes, so Mikoto had surely suffocated, but Yuri was a member of White Alligator and knew very well that common knowledge did not always apply with Level 5s.

And then something happened.

Specifically, Yuri realized a strange vibration was repeating within the oil composite armor that should have been under her control.

(Don’t tell me she mixed a bunch of iron sand in with the oil. But where is she getting the oxygen she needs for her brain to-…Wait, is this vibration…!?)

There was oxygen in oil. It was just that human lungs could not make use of it. By vibrating the iron sand, Misaka Mikoto was accurately breaking down the oil and carrying only the oxygen, nitrogen, and other components of air to her mouth.

And it did not end there.

When those components of the oil were removed, the oil had changed enough to lose its characteristics as oil.

Military Oil was the power to freely control the properties of oil and petroleum products.

If what she was controlling lost its characteristics and composition as oil, she lost her control over it. Yuri did not have the power to directly control hydrocarbons or sulfur.

“Wh-what…!?”

With a disconcerting sound, the giant black mass split vertically down the middle. A singe level 5 appeared from within, shaking off the power of a group of Level 4s.

“Honestly, this was one hell of a result.”

The #3 was not even looking at her enemy.

She was focused on the PDA in her hand. Misaka Mikoto spoke to Yuri, but it was almost as an afterthought.

“Did you know this? The story was that Saitou-sensei had disappeared without a trace from Nagatenjouki Academy, but the security guard had been given a few of his belongings as lost items. I found some interesting data in his cell phone charger.”

“From the firmware’s memory area…?”

“Right. Anyway, I analyzed the seemingly random numbers in there and got the key code to a cloud service. I’m in the middle of downloading all the data he had on the internet there.” Mikoto lightly waved the PDA. “It seems to be information on this White Alligator that Aizono Mio mentioned before. He has a file on all the eyewitness reports, one on his overall conjectures about the organization, and even a member list. It does seem none of this ever left the area of conjecture even for Saitou-sensei though.”

This information had not been what he had used to search out the hospital Aizono Mio had been in and bring her to the path of recovery.

The dates of the files were simply too recent.

“Aishima Hitomi, Aizono Mio, Olosun, Francisca Obidos, Kawamo Ryuubi, Kochonwon, Konoha Yayoi, Sakasama Yuri, Ilenia Sagileska, Shirokabe Renka, Suzunari Yuuhi, Sejou Aika, Catherine Hardclass, Hyoudou Maki, Maruiwa Kurumi, Mishou Yui, Irelia Mordman, Yumesaki Saibi, Yoake Sayori, Yosegi Misato, Raidou Yuuko, Wajiku Kobina… Does that list sound familiar? I expect it’s a list of the members at the time White Alligator collapsed. Most of their whereabouts are unknown, but the ‘suggested sites’ list at the end of the file makes it seem he was working on tracking them down.”

That meant…

“Even as I look at this, I find it hard to believe. Even while he was taking care of all the complaints from those parents, Saitou-sensei was tracking down White Alligator after its collapse all on his own. For years and years.”

“…No…”

There was no need to ask why he had been doing it.

In the end, that was the kind of person Saitou Souta was. Even while trapped in an environment anyone would want to be rescued from, his conviction did not waver. In fact, he did not even view their troubles as ‘evil things’ that would cause his conviction to waver.

It was true that he had not made it in time.

It was true that an outspoken ill will had gotten in the way and led to an unfortunate accident occurring before he could reach out his hand.

However, Saitou Souta had not given up on rescuing those in White Alligator. He had not been satisfied with his success with Aizono Mio and abandoned the rest.

“Can you hear me, Aizono Mio?”

Misaka Mikoto had put the PDA back in her skirt pocket as it continued to download the data, and had then pulled out her cell phone. She had then used her thumb to call a different former elite than Yuri.

Mikoto smiled while holding a coin up with her other hand and aiming at Sakasama Yuri.

“It seems the teacher you trusted so much was the real deal.”

Part 13

White Alligator was an organization born within the deep darkness of Academy City. Getting ahold of everything about it is not easy.

It may be impossible for me to learn everything about it.

And I do not care if that is the case.

Many lives were lost in the process of its foundation and I have heard that many of the surviving members' lives were lost when the organization collapsed. From the beginning, there has been no way for me to play the part of some idealized hero. The only path left to me is to find the few children who have survived, heal the wounds in their hearts, and bring them back to society.

I may not be strong enough to accomplish this, but I cannot abandon them.

There is no such thing as a time machine, so I cannot change the past, but there is something wrong when people continue to suffer without even realizing that they have already been freed.

Some people referred to those girls as "beasts".

However, I doubt those very people knew of those girls' true strength.

In Aizono-kun's case, I learned of a portion of that strength.

That strength is the hope Academy City holds even as it also holds such deep darkness.

I can do no more than help, but I am sure something will change within Academy City's darkness if I am one day able to teach the rest of White Alligator about that hope. And then I will be able to find pride in myself.

I will be glad that I have lived to that day.

Part 14

Aizono Mio heard that report. Paying no heed to the approaching threat, she silently reflected on the information reaching her through her cell phone and the will of the teacher who had once stood beside her.

“…There was just no helping him,” she muttered

That was all she said, but that slight comment was accompanied by a small change in Aizono Mio’s expression. This expression was different from when she had been seeking revenge and from when she had overcome that and was determined to save Saitou Souta. It was the expression she had in her happiest time.

And then that expression changed to something different yet again.

She blew through it all.

Tossing the cell phone aside, she directly faced the Multiphase Straight Hammer that had been nothing but a symbol of fear and death.

“This isn’t like me, but with the *real protagonist* down for the count, I have no choice. Even if it’s out of character, I’ll get serious here in place of that prince.”

“What…?”

“*I’m saying I’ll kick all of your asses and save you, baby!”*

While making an indecent gesture with her middle finger, Aizono Mio made that announcement as Saitou Souta’s student.

Hyoudou Maki’s cheek twitched slightly.

“Are you saying you, a member of White Alligator, will do what Saitou Souta did?”

“I can be pretty strict.”

“That was a miracle that man performed. After all the blood you have soaked up and all the flesh you have consumed while crawling through mud and blood in White Alligator, do you really think you have enough hope to perform that same miracle!?”

“Just let me save you already. We’re actually relying too much on him. Like this, we can’t complain about all those parents. …How about we actually try to give him some rest?”

“I thought you had learned that we do not live in a world where determination and guts will get you anywhere.”

“No, those things have more power than I thought. After all, they are what saved me from that darkness.”

“Kohina, Sayori.”

As if to cut Aizono off, Maki called the names of her comrades.

The one to end a conversation when it seemed overpowering was the one at the disadvantage.

“Let’s wear her down until she sinks into a sea of blood. Continue firing as planned.”

“Understood.”

“Crushing a single irregular is the ideal way to use White Alligator.”

Greater than 10 thick rubber bands strained as they pulled back from where they were connected to the metal tanks, the railings of the midair walkways, and other locations. The straining noise was proof of the overwhelming energy being stored. It looked like a sinister flower. Its destructive power came from the projectile it fired being torn apart in the air and spreading out as a wall-like shockwave.

Maki had control of the device as she announced, “Wherever you try to run, the surface will knock you down. Whatever defenses you put up will be worn down.

The surefire tactics of White Alligator leave no room for vague concepts such as hope.”

“What a boring announcement.” With a thin smile, Aizono Mio controlled the black oil around her to create a long whip. “At least say something fun like that you’re going to cut through me with this one attack☆”

“…”

Moments later, a roar great enough to shake the entire facility was mercilessly let loose.

Part 15

In that instant, the air within the facility roared up. The metal objects such as the metal plates of the tanks and the railings of the midair walkways were blown to pieces. The sound seemed to come after the sight.

However…

This was not caused by the Multiphase Straight Hammer's projectile breaking up in midair and creating a surface from the shockwave.

Aizono Mio had swung the black, whip-like blade to slice apart the tanks, walkways, and floor the thick rubber bands were attached to. Military Oil itself gave greater control to the enemies because of their greater numbers. However, the objects holding the rubber bands in place were normal objects. Even Aizono's power was enough to slice them apart.

And…

When the rubber bands holding so much power suddenly lost one of their supports, the rubber bands naturally flew in the opposite direction with the heavy metal fragments still attached.

In other words, countless weights flew toward Hyoudou Maki as she held the projectile.

"Eh…?"

It was for just an instant, but she froze.

Immediately afterwards, the weights stabbed in from almost every direction with overwhelming speed. The power was much less than when all the energy was collected in one point, but it was more than enough to crush a human body.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?" Maki screamed, but that also

meant she was still in a state where she *could* scream.

She had used her Military Oil composite armor dress to avoid a fatal blow.

Meanwhile, Aizono headed forward.

She headed toward the other three girls.

“It seems one means of counteracting Military Oil is to mix other objects such as metal into the oil. Well, my version was a bit more attack oriented.”

“D-damn you…!!”

“It’s true that all members of White Alligator are equally powered Level 4s, so pure numbers will decide the victor. However, I am no longer a member of White Alligator. I did not continue growing in the same direction as you did afterwards.”

In a way, that was the last thing Maki, Kohina, and Sayori wanted to hear.

It started having an effect greater than a simple mental one.

“I’m not stupid enough to boast about it, but I learned a lot over the course of that incident. *Now let’s settle this using what we weren’t just given by those filthy adults*.”

“!! Kohina, Sayori! We can’t use the Hammer anymore. Let’s overwhelm her with numbers and speed!!”

“Understood!!”

“…!!”

No response came from Sayori.

Maki frantically spun around to find Sayori convulsing while still standing. A thick, severed cable laid at her feet. It was a piece of the instrumentation used as the weight when the thick rubber bands had attacked Maki. The capacitors must have still had some power left in them which was now attacking Sayori.

As the others watched on, Sayori finally collapsed to the floor.

“Even while using the Military Oil composite armor dress, an electric current with a high enough voltage can still get through. I learned that the hard way.”

As she spoke, Aizono took a large step forward.

She made it seem she was headed for Maki, but her real target was Kohina.

A sound like a gas being expelled was heard and a characteristic irritating smell seemed to stab into Kohina’s nose.

“This smell…napalm!?”

Kohina immediately tried to gather up oil to strengthen her defenses, but…

“It was a feint. By the way, did you know that lowers your mobility?”

“!!”

Before Kohina could take another breath, Aizono used the black whip to grab and lift up the severed cable.

“And as I said before, a current with a high enough voltage can penetrate that composite armor!!”

A zapping noise exploded out.

Kohina convulsed before collapsing to the floor. The way her composite armor dress turned back into oil showed that she had lost consciousness.

“Now then.”

“Kh…!!”

With the sound of sliced air, Aizono and Maki formed blades at the same moment. One was an intentional offensive action and the other was a reflexive defensive reaction. Even if it was the same act, their stances were clearly different.

“Three can overwhelm me. But one can only counterbalance me. Wasn’t that it?”

“Yes, but even if you have improved your situation, a draw is still the best option

remaining for you.”

“No, what we obtained after White Alligator will decide this. I am proud of what I did during that kind time, but can the same be said for you?”

“…!!”

“You continued to fight in the darkness as you wanted. Even without White Alligator, you gained your own kind of growth. However, that growth was of the worst kind. I will show just what power there lies in being saved by Saitou-sensei. And I hope that you all will also receive the same one day.”

The clash of blade on blade repeated a few times before it came to a quick end.

Part 16

By the time Misaka Mikoto crawled back up from the multipurpose drain while carrying Yuri's unconscious form over her shoulder, it was already over.

"Did you take care of everything here?"

"There was nothing you need to worry about."

"Things were pretty close on my end. She tried gathered up all the oil she could and truly almost stripped me nude."

With a grunt of exertion, Mikoto lowered Yuri to the floor.

Aizono gave a light sigh and said, "It seems the higher ups have decided that Saitou Souta has developed a control manual for the minds of the former White Alligator elites. They were using these four to retrieve that manual. Without taking care of these higher ups, his safety cannot be guaranteed."

Maki had said they would be "devoured by another portion of the darkness before long", but that was no guarantee.

"Could you get the higher ups' identities from your former comrades?"

"That could be difficult. Are who they think the higher ups even really the higher ups? They could be dealing with some middleman or body double for all we know."

"I see. But it isn't like we have no hints whatsoever."

"?"

Mikoto pulled a cell phone out from the half-melted oil dress Yuri was wearing.

"Whoever is in control will have control of the communications network and

will have a superiority complex. We just have to send fake emails between the White Alligator members. Maybe have them tell each other to flee because they have no way of winning. When whoever is behind this intercepts the emails, they are sure to do something. And they will be panicked. With a great force like White Alligator gone, the organization will be lacking manpower. Most likely, people who normally would never show themselves will make an appearance."

"So you're saying we just have to capture the ones who show up to silence them?"

"That will be my job. You have something you need to do first," said Mikoto lightly as she gathered the cell phones. "So where's Saitou-sensei?"

"He's most likely in that metal tank. From the way Maki was speaking, it seemed to be a safe zone."

"By the way, what happened here? Most of the tanks have been destroyed and the midair walkways are a complete mess."

"Just a hellish independent lesson that would shock anyone in an after school special."

Aizono practically had to drag herself along as she walked step by step up the stairs wrapped around the side of the metal tank. Mikoto followed her. At about three stories up, they reached the top where they found something like a giant hatch. After turning the round handle to unlock it, Aizono used both hands to open the hatch.

The tank was filled almost up to the full line with a clear liquid. A single small inflatable boat was floating on top of the liquid. Close enough to reach out and grab was a man in a hospital gown connected to a life support device. His eyes were closed and he was completely unmoving. However, the monitor display showed that he was indeed alive.

For Misaka Mikoto, it was her first time seeing Saitou Souta.

And for Aizono Mio…

"…"

The black dress she wore changed shape. It became a normal high school uniform. It was the symbol of her connection with the man. Along with her clothes, Aizono Mio’s expression also changed. That expression Mikoto had not seen on her before may have been the greatest thing Saitou Souta had once given her.

What was going on within Aizono in that instant?

What was she thinking now that she had finally acquired the greatest result for her efforts?

Most likely as a means of waterproofing the life support device, something made of clear plastic covered the entire inflatable boat. Aizono Mio’s slender hand timidly touched and stroked Saitou Souta’s cheek trough the plastic. There was a slight change in the readings on the monitor, but that was it. Saitou Souta did not even twitch.

Even so, Aizono Mio gave a satisfied smile.

“I have to say goodbye for a while, sensei.”

Part 17

Saten Ruiko lazed about in her dorm room. Not long before, she had helped resolve a major incident, but as soon as things got dangerous, she was left out completely. Misaka Mikoto was the #3 Level 5, and Shirai Kuroko and Uiharu Kazari were both in Judgment, so she knew it was only natural for them to be the ones in danger. She knew that, but…

“Hmm. But I have a feeling the information I dug up on ‘The Whereabouts of Saitou Souta’ was pretty important.”

Complaining was not going to help.

She puffed out her cheeks and moved the mouse to dig through yet another urban legend site. (Whether she was laughing or crying, her actions did not change much.) Besides stories about an explosion in a sewer facility and a mysterious, bluish-white flash of light half-destroying a counseling facility, she also found one other thing of interest.

She thought it was just a variation of a certain story, but it seemed to be a completely new story.

After Saten read through what was written, she looked back up at the title and her shoulders sank.

“…‘What Happened to Saitou-sensei Afterwards’?”